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THE SYSTEM

Concerns grow as work starts on Plymouth, Middleboro lines

The words flash across John Powers' computer screen in a continuous loop: "The Old Colony Will Run in 1996!"

As the assistant director of design and construction for the Old Colony Railroad, Powers is supposed to turn that slogan into reality.

And he's discovered that balancing the competing interests of residents in 32 communities south of Boston is no easy task.

"This is New England," Powers says. "Every town reveres itself as sort of special. Every single town has had a problem."

While the Greenbush spur is the most controversial of the railroad's three branches, there have been plenty of smaller snags on the Plymouth and Middleboro lines.

"Change is a very difficult thing for people," says Powers, whose father was Senate president when the Legislature stopped subsidies to the Old Colony in 1959. "I don't care if you're building a parking lot. People are reluctant to change."

But what the father helped kill, the son is working to rebuild.

From demands for noise barriers to requests for better-looking platforms to a lawsuit over a station location, people in the communities along the Plymouth and Middleboro lines have raised plenty of concerns.

Work on the Middleboro and Plymouth lines is under way, and trains are scheduled to start chugging by December 1996.

A \$21 million rail bridge over the Neponset River between Boston and Quincy is complete. Later this spring contractors will begin rebuilding track to Plymouth and Middleboro.

The budget for both lines is \$503 million.

Old Colony trains will run from South Station to Braintree, where the Middleboro line branches off and runs about 25 miles past grazing horses, graffiti-covered

buildings in Brockton, the state prison in Bridgewater and Bridgewater State College.

Trains will stop in Braintree and at six other stations: Holbrook-Randolph, Montello, Brockton, Campello, Bridgewater State College and Middleboro-Lakeville.

The T expects 5,000 riders by the year 2000, which would make Middleboro the heaviest traveled Old Colony

branch. Trains will cross roads at 23 points.

The Plymouth branch stretches about 25 miles from Braintree and is the straightest of the three lines. It is also the wettest. Trains will zip through wetlands and woods and around cranberry bogs and ponds.

It has seven planned stations: South Weymouth, Abington, Whitman, Hanson, Halifax, Kingston and Plymouth. The

Plymouth station, just north of Cordage Park, would be used mostly on off-peak hours and weekends. Trains will cross roads at 39 points.

The MBTA expects Plymouth ridership to reach 2,800 by the year 2000.

Trips from the end of either the Plymouth or Middleboro line to Boston will take 58 minutes and cost \$4.

But as design and construction has proceeded, a few trouble spots have emerged:

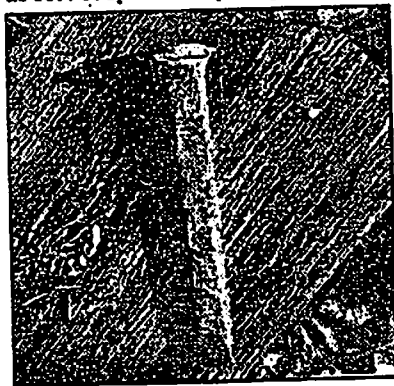
- The Kingston station is planned at the site of the O'Donnell Sand and Gravel company off Marion Drive near the Plymouth line. It would include a 730-foot platform, parking for 1,000 cars and a layover yard. But a group of Kingston residents has filed a lawsuit, charging that the T did not adequately address concerns about traffic, air quality and groundwater.

- The Plymouth line will run through Hanson's water protection district and near the town's only source of drinking water. Town officials are worried that pesticides and weed killers applied on the rail bed will contaminate the water.

- Town officials in Randolph say the T's plans for two stations are short on esthetics. They want the T to add "character" to designs that consist of a simple platform and canopy.

- Middleboro, Bridgewater, Brockton and Kingston have all asked the T to consider changing station sites in their communities.

Those requests are still pending, and MBTA General Manager John J. Haley Jr. says it's doubtful that any changes will be made.



A spike rests on an old Greenbush line railroad tie in Cohasset.